

## Political - Religious Poetry of the Shi'ites During the Umayyad Period\*

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\* This Paper is part of the Researcher's Ph.D.Dissertation.

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## Abstract

With the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate, the opponent parties, such as the Kharijites and Shi'ites, accused the Umayyads as usurpers of the Muslim authority. The partisans of Ali, the Shi'ites, started composing many poems which had description of the Hashimites as the legitimate rulers of Muslims using the Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions in their poems, therefore, one could see terms as: Imam, Wasi, and Mahdi as indications of the Islamic meaning of the "Caliph".

The word Wasi, which means executor or mandator, was used as successor of the Prophet, therefore, the first wasi was Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib who is the legitimate ruler of the Muslim community, and Mahdi (Messiah) is the last Imam. Many shi'ite poets have employed these words in shi'ite poetry such poets included: Al-Kumayt ibn Zayd, Kuthayyir ibn Abd Al-Rahman, Abu Al-Aswad Al-Du'ali and Al-Sayyid al-Himyari.

The Shi'ites have brought attention to the event of Ghadir Khumm, when the Prophet Muhammad announced the leadership of Ali on 18 Dhu al-Hijjah. This the shi'ite poets took as wasiyah (testament), therefore, they composed many poems about the event, some poets like Sufyan ibn Mus'ab al-'Abdi, al-Mughirah ibn Nawfal and others used this word in their poetry. However, the idea of Mahdi came as a result of the aggression of the Umayyads and reflected their own lives, and how they absorbed the idea of shi'ism. The shi'ite poets were inclined to favour the Hashimites, who were the Prophet's relatives.





The **Hijrah** or journey of Muhammad from Makkah, his hometown, to Madinah marked a turning point in the history of Arabic poetry as well as in the formation of the Islamic community, (**ummah**). Muhammad and his companions began to strengthen their own community by defending it and attacking their enemies. In response, the Quraysh composed a satire concerning Muhammad and the Muslim community. The Prophet ordered some Muslim poets to answer the Quraysh attacks and to satirize them for their paganism. During the Umayyad period, by reason of the conflict among Muslims, politico-religious poetry gained strength.<sup>1</sup>

With the establishment of the **ummah** in Madinah, Muhammad stepped into the role of political and military leader as well as Prophet and Messenger of God. This unity of political and religious leadership extended to his successors, the caliphs, except that they did not assume the unique prophetic mission of Muhammad. When Abu Bakr and the following three caliphs were elected they succeeded Muhammad as heads of a religious community whose role demanded a military and a political leadership.<sup>2</sup>

With the increase of tension between Muslims, politico-religious poetry flourished on the basis of the developing ideas and differences of interpretation. These derived from the conflict during the Umayyad period concerning the legitimate right to rule the Muslims. Because the Umayyads succeeded to the caliphate by force of arms, they harnessed the great power of poetry to retain their hold on power. They also opened their doors to poetic talents, and even accepted some opponents. The other parties, however, challenged the Umayyads by encouraging their own poets to defend their ways and to attack the Umayyads. This conflict in poetry created a new horizon of meaning and attitude in poetry.<sup>3</sup>

As Mu'awiyah wished to keep rival Arabs away from the centers of power, he inflamed the conflicts among the Arab tribes. This led to the revival of tribal chauvinism which Islam had tried to bury. Arabic poets became embroiled in the chauvinism or racism which existed among the Arabs themselves and also between Arabs and non-Arabs.<sup>4</sup>

This was a rather crafty effort by the Umayyads to keep the balance of power. It was, however, a sword that cut two ways, for it was also one of the factors that led to the downfall of Umayyad rule. Politico-religious poetry gained extraordinary splendor during these conflicts, and the tribal quarrels did not keep the poets of the contending parties from treating the main issue, which was the caliphate. Rather, the poets used the tribal conflict to protect their parties against outside forces. Thus al-Kumayt used racialism to protect the Hashimites.<sup>5</sup> Politico-regious poetry centered on the caliphate or the leadership

of the Muslims. All political parties looked for the best leader according to their own particular doctrine. According to the Shi'ites, the leadership, or imamate, should come from Ahl al-Bayt, the household of Muhammad, and especially from the descendants of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and Fatimah, a daughter of the Prophet. Further, the Shi'ites believed that the Imam could not claim the leadership without the bay'ah or the oath of allegiance. This is taken voluntarily from the Muslims. The shi'ite Imams believe that, at Ghadir Khumm the Prophet bequeathed to 'Ali the leadership of those who were to come after him, and that 'Ali bequeathed it to his son Hasan, and from him to his brother Husayn, and so on, to the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, or Messiah.<sup>6</sup> In this way, the Imam designates his successor before he dies, and the authority of the successor is derived from that designation, **nass**.<sup>7</sup>

Key topics that occur commonly in shi'ite political-religious poetry are the **wasi** (executor), **imam** (leader), **imamat** (leadership, imamate), and **mahdi** (the rightly guided one). Most shi'ite poets composed many poems in which these words were predominant. However, the shi'ite religious thinkers did not consider the imamate to constitute an inheritance, but rather a recommendation from the prior imam that they should take over the imamate by bequest. Further, each Muslim who rejected the bay'ah to the imam was not considered to be non-Muslim; he is dealt with as a Muslim.<sup>8</sup>

Following the assassination of 'Ali and the martyrdom of Husayn, the themes of the **wasi**, the **imam** and the **mahdi** spread over more in the shi'ite poetry. At that time, the idea that it was the right of Ahl al-Bayt to succeed the Prophet was strengthened, and the idea gained more supporters.

### The Imam

During 'Ali's reign, Qays ibn Sa'd ibn 'Ubada was among 'Ali's military leaders in Siffin. Qays composed a poem in which he mentioned 'Ali's imamate. He said:

وَعَلَى إِمَامَنَا وَإِمَامٍ  
لِسُونَا أَتَى بِهِ التَّرْبِيلُ  
يَوْمَ قَالَ الشَّيْءُ مَنْ كُنْتُ مَوْلاً  
هُ فَهَذَا مَوْلَاهُ حَطْبُ جَلِيلُ

And 'Ali is our imam and an imam

for others. Revelation brought this to pass.

The day the Prophet said: "To whomever I am master,  
this one ('Ali) is his master." It is a great matter.<sup>9</sup>

Qays insisted that 'Ali's imamate was revealed to Muhammad on the day of Ghadir Khumm. If contemporary, this verse would indicate that 'Ali's imamate was recognized by some during Muhammad's lifetime. Qays was a Companion

of the Prophet, and he was a witness to the Prophet's speech during the day of Ghadir Khumm. He did not merely recognize 'Ali as Amir al-Mu'minin for himself and like-minded persons, but also for other Muslims, including those who did not give him the bay'ah.

During the reign of Mu'awiyah, among the shi'ite poets who recognized the imamate of 'Ali was Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah al-Himyari. A number of poets, including Tirimmah al-Ta'i, Hisham al-Muradi and Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah al-Himyari, were gathered around Mu'awiyah when he said: "O group of poets, compose poems about 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, and say nothing except the truth. Then I will give him (the poet) this sum of money." Tirimmah recited his poem in which he cursed 'Ali. Mu'awiyah said: "Sit down! Surely God knew your intention and knew your position." Then Hisham composed his poem and cursed 'Ali. Mu'awiyah said the same to Hisham. Then Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah composed the poem in which he said:

عَلَيْنَا إِمَامٌ بِأَبِيهِ وَأُمِّهِ  
أَبُو الْحَسِينِ الْمُطَهَّرِ مِنْ حَرَامٍ  
إِمَامٌ هُدَى أَتَاهُ اللَّهُ عِلْمًا  
يَوْمَ غَرَفَ الْحَلَالُ مِنَ الْحَرَامِ

\* \* \* \* \*      \* \* \* \* \*

أَمِيرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ بِكَ اعْتَمَادِي  
وَبِالْفُرْقَانِيَّاتِيَّاتِي  
نَاسَنَا تَضَبَّةً فِي يَوْمِ حُمَّ  
مِنَ الْبَارِيِّ وَمِنْ خَيْرِ الْأَنَامِ

'Ali is our Imam — by my father and mother!  
 Abu al-Hasan, the purified from unlawful things.  
 Leader on the right way whom God gave knowledge,  
 By his knowledge right was known from wrong.

Commander of the Faithful: upon you rests my confidence,  
 And on the noble and blessed (i.e., Ahl al-Bayt) I depend.  
 They ignored his installation in Khumm,  
 By God and by the best among the people (the Prophet).<sup>10</sup>

Mu'awiyah gave the sum of money to Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah. The poet is unknown among some shi'ite religious scholars, but his poem is recorded in other sources.<sup>11</sup> This poem draws attention to the event of Ghadir Khumm, which was famous even among 'Ali's enemies. It also indicates that the position of 'Ali among Muslims was well known.

Most shi'ite poets composed poems about Ghadir Khumm. Among these poets was al-Kumayt ibn Zayd al-Asadi, who wrote several poems and

mentioned that event. In one of his poems he said:

عَلَيْيَ أَمِيرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَحْدَهُ  
مِنَ اللَّهِ مَفْرُوضٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ  
وَإِنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ أَزَصَى بِحَقِّهِ  
وَأَشْرَكَهُ فِي كُلِّ حَقٍّ مُفْسَمٍ  
وَأَوْجَبَ يَزْمَانًا بِالْغَدَيرِ وَلَا يَةَ  
عَلَى كُلِّ بَرٍّ مِنْ فَصِيحٍ وَأَغْجَمٍ

‘Ali, commander of the Faithful, and his right, obligated by God to rule over every Muslim.

Surely the Messenger of God recommended his right, and he (Muhammad) shared with him every right which could be shared.

Making it a duty one day in Ghadir Khumm to assume the leadership.

Over every pious person, those speaking clear Arabic and those broken in speech.<sup>12</sup>

Al-Kumayt focused on the day of Ghadir Khumm as a day on which the Prophet announced the leadership of ‘Ali, and the Shi’ites celebrate this day as the ‘Eid al-ghadir, 18 Dhu'l-Hijjah. The Sunnis, however, never recognized that day as it is celebrated by the Shi’ites.<sup>13</sup> The day of Ghadir was first celebrated sometime in the first century of Islam. During that time, Sufyan ibn Mus’ab al-‘Abdi composed long poems. In one he included the lines:

لَمَا رَقَى أَخْمَدُ الْهَادِي عَلَى قَبِ ثَاوَ لَدَنِيهِ وَمِنْ مُضْعَفِ وَمُرْتَقَبِ أَبْلَغَ النَّاسَ وَالثَّبَلِيَّعَ أَجَدَرَ بِسِ بَعْدِي وَإِنَّ عَلِيًّا خَيْرُ مُنْتَصِبِ	وَكَانَ عَنْهَا لَهُمْ فِي حُمَّمٍ مُزَدَّجَرٌ وَقَالَ وَالنَّاسُ مِنْ دَانِ إِلَيْهِ وَمِنْ قُمَّ يَا عَلِيٌّ فَإِنِّي قَدْ أُمِرْتُ بِأَنْ إِنِّي نَصَبْتُ عَلَيْهَا هَادِيًّا عَلَمًا
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They were driven away from it (the caliphate)  
 When the rightly guided Ahmad (Muhammad) climbed  
 up on a pack saddle.  
 He said while people drew near him  
 And settled down, listened and watched.  
 O ‘Ali! Stand up! Surely I was ordered to  
 tell the people and telling them is dear to me.  
 Surely I have appointed ‘Ali, rightly guided banner,  
 And after me ‘Ali is surely the best for that post.<sup>14</sup>

This poem shows a clear intention of the poet to explain what happened in Ghadir Khumm. Al-‘Abdi has put into his poem the state of the Muslims as they listened to Muuammad’s announcement concerning the leadership that had

been bequeathed to ‘Ali. In his book **Al-Ghadir**, al-Amini discusses all versions, including those transmitted by sunni as well as shi'ite scholars, of the tradition of the Prophet regarding the day of Ghadir Khumm. That is, he collected every version of the **Hadith**.<sup>15</sup>

Few scholars have written about religious-political or ideological poetry. Allowed a few pages to treat Umayyad poetry, Salma al-Jayyusi selected only al-Kumayt, the most prominent shi'ite poet. Even all the ideas of al-Kumayt could not be covered in a few pages.<sup>16</sup> Al-Kumayt deals with all shi'ite ideas and argued with the Umayyads about them in logical terms. He was the one who opened the gate of the shi'ite argument in poetries.

Besides al-Kumayt, al-Sayyid al-Himyari composed many poems about ‘Ali, extolling his every virtue, **manqabah**. Al-Sayyid mentioned the event of Ghadir Khumm in twenty-three of his poems. In one of his poems, “Ghadiriyah” he said:

مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي أَخْمَدُ مِنْ بَنِيهِمْ      يَوْمَ غَدِيرِ الْخُمُّ نَادَاهُ  
أَقَامَهُ مِنْ بَنِينَ أَنْجَابَهُ      وَهُمْ حَوْالَنِيهِ فَسَمَّاهُ  
هَذَا عَلَيَّ بْنُ أَبِي طَالِبٍ      مَوْلَاهُ لِمَنْ قَدْ كُنْتُ مَوْلَاهُ

Who was it that the most praiseworthy<sup>17</sup> from among them?

The day of Ghadir Khumm.

Stood him up from among his companions.

And those around him; then he named him:

“This is ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib,  
A master to whomever I am master.”<sup>18</sup>

His poem, “Ali-‘Ayniyah,” is a biography of ‘Ali. There he mentioned all of ‘Ali’s wars fought during Muhammad’s lifetime. Al-Sayid loved Ahl al-Bayt, especially ‘Ali. He said:

إِنِّي لَا كُرْهَةَ أَنْ أُطِيلَ بِمَجْلِسِ  
لَا ذُكْرَ فِيهِ لِفَضْلِ آلِ مُحَمَّدٍ

Surely I hate to stay a long time in a meeting

When there is no mention in it of the virtues of Muhammad’s family.<sup>19</sup>

For this reason he devoted much of his poetry to Ahl al-Bayt. He also said:

أَلَا إِنَّ الرَّوْصَيَّةَ دُونَ شَكٍ  
لِخَيْرِ النَّاسِ مِنْ سَامِ وَحَامِ  
وَقَالَ مُحَمَّدٌ بِغَدِيرِ خُمُّ  
عَنِ الرَّحْمَنِ يَنْطَقُ بِاغْتِزَامٍ  
أَلَا مَنْ كُنْتُ مَوْلَاهُ فَأَشْتَمِعُوا كَلَامِي

It was surely the commandment, no doubt,

To the best among the people descended from

Shem and Ham (sons of Noah).  
And Muhammad spoke in Ghadir Khumm  
Words on the authority of the Merciful,  
“To whomever I am master, surely this  
my brother, is his master. Listen, all of you, to my speech!”<sup>20</sup>

Once again the original words of Muhammad at Ghadir Khumm come, in poetic verse, to assure the audience that the leadership of ‘Ali after the Prophet was proper. Al-Sayyid insisted that ‘Ali be appointed over not only Muslims, but also over the whole world that is descended from Noah through his two sons Shem and Ham. The Shi’ites believed that the caliphate or imamate must be held by virtue of **nass**, the designation by each incumbent imam of his successor.<sup>21</sup>

### The Wasi

Did the tradition of nass prevail from the Prophet to ‘Ali? Shi’ite scholars regarded the day of Ghadir Khumm as a nass from the Prophet to ‘Ali, and they supported this tradition with verses from the Qur’an and from other traditions surrounding Muhammad. There were many Qur’anic verses that supported the shi’ite claims. One such verse is known as the **wilayah** verse:

إِنَّمَا وَلِيْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِنَّمَا يُقْرَبُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيَأْتُونَ الرَّزْكَةَ وَهُمْ رَاكِعُونَ

Your real friends are no less than God, His Apostle,  
and the fellowship of believers, i.e. those who establish  
regular prayers and regularly observe charity as they  
bow in prayer.

It was said that this verse revealed to Muhammad the truth about ‘Ali when, during a time of prayer, he donated his ring to a beggar.<sup>23</sup> There were other pertinent verses that supported the view held by the shi’ite scholars. There were also many traditions that supported the leadership of ‘Ali. Among them were:

أَلَا أَتَيْ تَارِكٌ فِيْكُمُ الْقَلَيْنِ، كِتَابُ اللَّهِ وَعِثْرَتِيْ أَهْلَ بَيْتِيْ.

Verily I am leaving among you the two objects of high estimation and of care, the Book of God and my near kindred.<sup>24</sup>

The shi’ite scholars mentioned additional Hadith in support of their ideas concerning ‘Ali’s imamate and his heirs. Because of their belief in ‘Ali’s calling to follow Muhammad as the leader, the Shi’ites called ‘Ali “Wasi of the Prophet,” his executor.

The sunni scholars nevertheless rejected the shi'ite interpretation of such Qur'anic passages and the Hadith of the Shi'ites. They had their own explanation of those verses, and their own interpretations of the Hadith. Sunni opinion was divided into two groups. One group rejected all Hadith about the imamate of 'Ali expressing suspicion with regard to the texts and the isnads (chains of transmitters). One of these persons was Ibn Taymiyah. The other group accepted the Hadith as sound, but they had their own explanations; which differed from the shi'ite interpretations. Among this latter group was Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani.<sup>25</sup>

Shi'ite scholars were among the first to write books about the imamate and the political theory of Islam. Their theories naturally colored their arguments. The efforts of the shi'ite **ulama** reached an early peak in Islamic political theory. Because their work antedated that of sunni scholars, the latter are found adopting the shi'ite terms and the qualifications required of the imam (caliph), though their interpretations on legitimacy differed.

The first to write about the imamate was 'Ali ibn Isma'il ibn Maytham al-Tammar. (His grandfather was a companion of 'Ali). He wrote the *Kitab al-Imamah*. Following this, Hisham ibn al-Hakam, who was a friend of Ja'far al-Sadiq, wrote several books, including another *kitab al-Imamah*, and **The Difference between People Concerning the Imamate**.<sup>26</sup>

In shi'ite political-religious poetry one can trace the use of such words as **wasi** (executor) and **wasiyah** (testament). The shi'ite poets used these words, as we have said, to indicate the imamate of 'Ali and his successors among the Ahl al-Bayt. Terms of this kind were well-known even during 'Ali's reign. One of his contemporaries, the poet, Abu al-Aswad al-Du'aili, said:

أَحِبُّ مُحَمَّدًا حَبًّا شَدِيدًا وَعَبَاسًا وَحَفْرَةَ الْوَصِيَّا

I love Muhammad with a great love.

And I love 'Abbas, Hamzah, and the Executor (i.e. 'Ali).<sup>27</sup>

There is no mention of any protest by 'Ali concerning any poet who used this word. It may be assumed, then, that 'Ali was content to use it. Even al-Najashi, who was close to 'Ali, used this word when he said:

وَصِيٌّ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ مِنْ دُونِ أَهْلِهِ وَزَارِثَةٌ بَعْدَ الْغَمْوُمِ الْأَكَابِرِ

The executor of the Messenger of God, rather than  
others of his family,

And his heir after the senior uncles.<sup>28</sup>

The term **wasi**, as applied to 'Ali, was well known even among the enemies of 'Ali. It was said that a young man from the army of Basrah, during the Battle of the Camel, recited a rajaz poem in which he said:

نَخْنُ بَنُو ضَبْطَةِ أَغْدَاءِ عَلَى ذَلِكَ الَّذِي يُعْرَفُ قَدْمًا بِالْوَصِيِّ

We are sons of Dabbah, enemies of ‘Ali

Who of old was known as the **wasi**.

Ibn Qays al-Ruqayyat, the Zubayrid poet, also mentioned the **wasi** in his poems. There is no evidence from ‘Ali’s lifetime to reject this assertion.<sup>29</sup> It seems that this word was employed even by the Prophet in a tradition by Salman al-Farisi when he asked the Prophet: “Who is your executor (**wasi**)?” The Prophet replied: “My executor and inheritor is ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib.”<sup>30</sup> There are, in addition, in the **Manaqib**, collected from many sources, a number of traditions with the same import.<sup>31</sup>

Among ‘Ali’s contemporaries was also al-Mughirah ibn Nawfal ibn al-Harith. He mentioned the **wasi** during the Siffin War. He said:

فِيكُمْ وَصِيٌّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ قَاتِلُكُمْ وَصَهْرَهُ وَكِتَابُ اللَّهِ قَدْ نَثَرَا

Among you was the **wasi** of the Messenger of God, your leader, And his son-in-law. And the Book of God had been circulated.<sup>32</sup> Al-Mughirah was a cousin of ‘Ali. Another of ‘Ali’s cousins was ‘Abdallah ibn Abi Sufyan ibn al-Harith. He mentioned the **wasi** after ‘Ali became caliph when he said:

وَصِيٌّ النَّبِيِّ الْمُضْطَفَى وَابْنُ عَمِّهِ وَأُولُّ مَنْ صَلَّى وَمَنْ لَانِ حَانِبَهُ

The **wasi** of the Chosen Prophet and his cousin,

The first to worship and to adopt Islam.<sup>33</sup>

There was therefore no doubt that the word **wasi** was well known during the time of Muhammad and ‘Ali.

After ‘Ali’s assassination, the shi’ite poets continued using this word to confirm the **wasiyah** (testament) of the heirs who were descended from ‘Ali. Among the poets using the term was al-Kumayt, who said:

وَالْوَصِيُّ الَّذِي أَمَّالَ التَّجْرِيْرَ بِي بِهِ عَرْزَشَ أُمَّةً لَانْهَادَامِ

And the **wasi** in whom al-Tajubi overturned

The throne of a nation, to demolish it.<sup>34</sup>

The **wasi**, ‘Ali, was murdered by ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Muljam, of the Tajub tribe, of Yemen.

Some scholars have written of al-Kumayt, describing his **Hashimiyat** as artistically feeble.<sup>35</sup> However, other scholars have praised the **Hashimiyat** as the best among al-Kumayt’s poems, and his fellow poet al-Farazdaq is reported to have said to him: “You are the most poetic among both the poets who have passed away and the poets who are still alive.” Note, too, that Ma‘adh al-Harra’, a Kufan philologist, said: “Al-Kumayt is the most poetic among the ancient and modern.” Al-Isfahani said that al-Kumayt was an ‘alim in the Arabic language

and an expert in history.<sup>36</sup> The accusation that his poetry was “feeble” is, it seems, not supportable. Moreover, a modern scholar who wrote about al-Kumayt said that he was a great and eloquent poet, a scholar in Arabic history and language who used **gharib** (obscurities) in his poems.<sup>37</sup> The shi'ite poets who used the term **wasi** most frequently in several poems was al-Sayyid al-Himyari, who composed a poem as if at the tongue of the Prophet in which he said:

هذا وصيٰ فِيْكُمْ وَخَلِيفَتِي لَا تَجْهَلُوهُ فَتَرْجِعُوْكُفَارًا

This is my executor among you, and my successor.

Do not ignore him lest you return to disbelief.<sup>38</sup>

Al-Sayyid wrote another poem in which he expressed the same sentiments:

هذا أخِي وَوَصيٰ فِي الْأُمُورِ وَمَن يَثْقُومُ فِيْكُمْ مَقَامِي عِنْدَ تِذْكَارِي

This is my brother and my executor in affairs

Who stands among you in my place when you  
remember me.<sup>39</sup>

Al-Sayyid also addressed a poem to Imam ‘Ali in which he employed the term **wasi**:

أَنْتَ وَصِيُّ الْمُضْطَفِي وَابْنُ عَمِّهِ فَإِنَّا نُعَادِي مُبْغَضِيكَ وَنَشْرُكِ

You are the executor of the Chosen Prophet, and  
his cousin.

Surely we are hostile to those who hate you and leave them.<sup>40</sup>

After al-Sayyid converted to the Imami sect he used the term “son of the **wasi**” for other imams such as Ja‘far:

وَابْنُ الْوَصِيِّ الْمُرْتَضَى وَشَيْهَةُ أَخْمَدَ فِيْ كَمَالِهِ

And son of the executor with whom God is pleased

And like Ahmad in his perfection.<sup>41</sup>

Later poets sometimes employed **wasi** in reference to other imams in order to give them a religious authority after the Umayyads had driven them from worldly power they possessed as caliphs.

### The Mahdi

Muslims believe in “mahdism” or messianism. The sunni and shi'ite ‘ulama’ recited many prophetic traditions about the Mahdi, which means “the rightly-guided one.” In the books of Hadith are to be found a number of traditions on the subject. The Prophet said: “Al-Mahdi, a man descended from me.” He further said: “God will send a man before the end of the earthly world.

This man will fill the earth with justice as it once had been filled with oppression.<sup>42</sup>

Among the Shi'ites, mahdism is very common. However, each shi'ite branch has its own Mahdi. He is 'Ali ibn Abi Talib or his son Muhammad (Ibn al-Hanafiyyah), as is the case of the Kaysaniyah, or he is the sixth imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, or his son Isma'il as in Isma'il thought, or he is the twelfth imam, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan, as the Imamiyah Ithna 'Ashariyah believe.<sup>43</sup> Whatever their differences, the Shi'ites all believe that, as the Prophet was a charismatic spiritual leader who also ruled as a statesman over Islamic society, the community needs a new charismatic leader to create and perfect an ideal Islamic society. That leader is the Mahdi who inherits the Prophet's authority and who actually becomes a rightful successor of the Prophet.<sup>44</sup>

During the Umayyad period, some Arab poets characterized some Umayyad caliphs as **mahdi**. The poet Jarir described Sulayman ibn 'Abd al-Malik using this word. He also was described by Farazdaq thus. Both Jarir the poet and al-Hasan al-Basri gave to 'Umar II the title **mahdi**. Jarir also described Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik as **mahdi**, while al-Farazdaq gave this title to Yazid II and his son al-Walid II. Thus the Arab poets frequently used this title in their poems.<sup>45</sup>

Because the Umayyad rulers subjected the shi'ite people to great oppression, the Shi'ites were deeply attached to the concept of the Mahdi, and to their ideas regarding justice, and to the notion that it was necessary to be divinely guided. This is reflected in their political poetry. Among these poets of the Shi'ites was Abu al-Tufayl 'Amir ibn Wathilah, who said:

إِخْرَانَا شِيَعَتَا لَا تَغْشَدُوا إِنِّي زَعِيمٌ لَكُمْ أَنْ تَزْيَشُدُوا  
وَأَنْ تَنَالُوا شَرْفًا وَتَسْعَدُوا وَوَازِرُوا الْمَهْدِيَ كَيْمًا تَهْتَدُوا

Our brothers, the Shi'ites, are not guilty of aggression.

Surely I say to you that you do what is right.

And that you gain honor and happiness.

And support the **mahdi** as you are led aright.<sup>46</sup>

It was said that Abu al-Tufayl was a Kaysani, a supporter of Ibn al-Hanafiyyah, but it seems that Abu al-Tufayl described Ibn al-Hanafiyyah as **mahdi**, in the sense of "rightly guided" but not as a messiah, as some other poets had.

The Kaysaniyah believed that Muhammad ibn 'Ali (Ibn al-Hanafiyyah) did not die and that he is alive in a mountain called Radwa'. A Kaysani poet, Kuthayyir ibn 'Abd al-Rahman, therefore said in a **rajaz** poem:

مَاتَ يَامَهْدِيُّ يَا بْنَ الْمُهَدِّدِيِّ أَنْتَ الَّذِي نَرَضَى بِهِ وَنَرَجِي

You did not die, O Mahdil Son of the rightly guided!

You are the one with whom we are satisfied, for whom we hope.<sup>47</sup>

Kuthayyir believed that Ibn al-Hanafiyyah was alive and that he would return to earth leading an army. The poet said:

وَسَبَطٌ لَا يَذُوقُ الْمَوْتَ حَتَّى يَقُولُ الْخَيْلَ يَقْدِمُهَا اللَّوَاءُ

And a grandson, who will not taste death,

Until he leads the horses, with flags going before him.<sup>48</sup>

The poet Kuthayyir does not merely describe Ibn al-Hanafiyyah as a **mahdi** but also asserts that Ka'b al-Ahbar<sup>49</sup> informed him about the **mahdi** or messiah who was also expected among the ancient nations. Kuthayyir composed:

هُوَ الْمَهْدِيُّ خَبَرَنَا كَعْبٌ أَخْوَ الْأَخْبَارِ فِي الْحَقِّ الْخَوَالِيِّ

He is the Mahdi of whom ka'b informed us

Brother of the rabbis in the old times.<sup>50</sup>

The Kyasaniyah died out because of their extremist notions and their followers converted to other sects characterized by more pragmatic thought. Among those who changed allegiance was al-Sayyid al-Himyari, who was converted by Ja'far or one of his students. However, before this, al-Sayyid composed poems about Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyyah as Mahdi, where he said:

سَمِئُ تِبِّيَا لَمْ يَبْقَ مِنْهُمْ سُواهُ فَعِنْدَهُ حَصَلَ الرَّجَاءُ

تَغَيَّبَ غَيْبَةً مِنْ غَيْرِ مَوْتٍ وَلَا قَتْلٍ وَسَازَ بِهِ الْقَضَاءُ

He is the namesake of the Prophet, there was no one remaining  
Except him, and for him anticipation exists.

He disappeared without dying

Or being killed and the decree of God took him.<sup>51</sup>

Al-Sayyid had believed that no true Imam was left except Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyyah, who went into occultation, at least according to their belief. He was clearly convinced of this doctrine, for he is said to have composed these lines:

لَهُ غَيْبَةٌ لَا بُدَّ مِنْ أَنْ يَغْيِبَهَا فَصَلَّى عَلَيْهِ اللَّهُ مِنْ مُشَفَّعِيْ

فَيَمْكُثُ حِيَاةً ثُمَّ يَظْهَرُ حِيَاةً فَيَمْلأُ عَذْلًا كُلَّ شَرْقٍ وَمَغْرِبٍ

He has an occultation that he must fulfill.

May God bless the one who has disappeared, for he will stay some time, then he will reappear in his time.

Then he will fill the world with justice from East to West.<sup>52</sup>

It was said that these lines were composed for Ja'far al-Sadiq.<sup>53</sup> Al-Sayyid described al-Mahdi as any Muslim theologian would, that is, that he disappeared and that he will come back to restore justice over the whole world. Al-Sayyid recited these lines concerning the long period of occultation of the *mahdi*:

يَا ابْنَ الرَّوْصِيِّ وَيَا سَمِّيَ مُحَمَّدٌ  
وَكُنْيَةَ نَفْسِي عَلَيْكَ تَذَرُّبٌ  
فَلَنْ غَابَ عَنَّا غَمْرَ نُوحٍ لَا يَقْنَتْ  
مِنَ النُّفُوسِ بِأَنَّهُ سَيَرْبُ

O son of the executor! Namesake of Muhammad!

And bearer of his nickname. My soul dissolves for you.

If he were absent for a time as long as the life of Noah,

Our souls would be sure that he will return.<sup>54</sup>

Al-Sayyid suggested the lifespan of Noah, 950 years according to the Qur'an, as an example of a long disappearance, confident that one day he would nevertheless reappear.

It was apparently after composing these verses that he met Ja'far al-Sadiq who convinced him to convert to the Imami sect, the Ja'far al-Sadiq who convinced him to convert to the Imami sect, the Ja'fariyah, who expected a Mahdi in the future in accordance with some traditions from the Prophet. This Mahdi also would bear the name Muhammad.<sup>55</sup> The traditions in the Hadith concerning the Mahdi were popular in the Umayyad period. Each party claimed that he would be among them. The Imam Shi'ites expected him to come from the Ahl al-Bayt, and they recited many Hadiths about him. The shi'ite poet, al-Kumayt ibn Zayd, composed a poem expressing a hope to see him, in which he said:

إِنِّي لَأَرْجُو لَهُ رُؤْيَا فَأَدْرِكُهُ  
حَتَّى أَكُونَ لَهُ مِنْ خَيْرِ أَتَبَاعٍ  
بِذَاكَ أَتَبَاعُ الرَّاوِونَ عَنْ نَفْرٍ  
مِنْهُمْ ذُوو حَشْيَةٍ لِلَّهِ طَوَاعٍ

Surely I wish for a vision of him, and to reach him,

That I might become one of the best of his followers.

About that the transmitter informed us, on the authority of several

Who feared God and were obedient.<sup>56</sup>

These lines were composed during the life of Ja'far al-Sadiq, the sixth Imam of the shi'ite Imamiyah.

As a result of the Umayyad oppression and the threats they expressed to the people to drive them away from the Hashimites, al-Kumayt stated in his poem:

فَقُلْ لِيَتِي أُمَّيَّةٌ حَيْثُ حَلُوا  
وَإِنْ خَفْتُ الْمُهَاجَدَ وَالْقَطِيعَا  
أَجَاعَ اللَّهُ مَنْ بِحِزْرَكُمْ أَجِيعَا

Say to the sons of Umayyah, wherever they stay,  
Even though I am afraid of the sword and the lash,  
May God make hungry whomever you satisfied,  
And may God satisfy all who by your tyranny were made hungry.<sup>57</sup>

Al-Kumayt spoke of the situation in which the Umayyads dealt unjustly with his people. They made many go hungry while others had more than enough to eat, and much money. In contradiction to Umayyad policy, the Shi'ites hoped to see a just man rule in the Islamic Empire and spread his justice over all people. Many traditions supporting this feeling grew up around the idea of the Mahdi. To express this desire, al-Kumayt composed some lines about him, in which he said:

يَكُونُ حَيَا لِأَمْتَهِ رَبِيعَا  
يَمْرِضِي السِّيَاسَةَ هَاشِمِيَّ  
وَلَيَنْشَا فِي الْمَشَاهِدِ غَيْرُ نُكْبِسِ  
لِشَفَوْمِ الْبَرِيَّةِ مُشَطِّعِا  
وَيَقِيمُ أَمْرَهَا وَيَذْبَحُ عَنْهَا  
وَيَشْرُكُ جَذْبَهَا أَبْدَأْ مَرِيعَا

In a Hashimite with pleasing policy,  
He would be alive, a spring for his people.  
He would be like a lion in the wars, not a coward,  
Able to reform the society of men,  
Arranging matters properly, and defending order,  
Changing forever drought to rich pastures.<sup>58</sup>

These lines reflect the dream of the Shi'ites, who wait for a religious-political leader who is able to rule in justice and defend the Ummah. In this ideal state, each person takes only what is right, and performs his duty without fear or threat. That ruler is al-Mahdi, the one who will restore God's order in the world.

### **Characteristics of Politico-Religious Poetry**

After the caliphate had become a monarchy and the Umayyads used force to strengthen their rule, and after the leadership over the Muslims had turned

into tyranny, the Shi'ites fomented revolts against the Umayyads in order to remove them from power. A just and legitimate caliphate became the cornerstone of Muslim demands. This drive contributed ultimately, of course, to the success of the 'Abbasid Revolution.

The politico-religious poetry of the Shi'ites is concerned with the question of the leadership of the Muslims. Therefore the poets emphasize the **imam**, (leader, caliph), **imamah**, (leadership), the **wasiyah**, (the Prophet's mandate or testament to his successor), the **wasi**, (executor of the Prophet), and the **mahdi**, (the rightly-guided one). All these categories are connected to one another in dispute, and the dispute is over the leadership to be exercised over the Muslims. The Shi'ites believed that the leadership was to go to Ahl al-Bayt and the most qualified among them, spiritually, was the Imam 'Ali, and after him his heirs. According to the shi'ite belief, they were the only legitimate rulers of the Muslim community.

The shi'ite poets used the term **imamah** instead of **khilafah**, to distinguish the legitimate leadership from those who ruled in the name of the caliphate even though they were guilty of a tribal fanaticism in which they oppressed people. For this reason, the **imamah** is a political-religious term, and it is employed to give religious reinforcement to the concept of the leadership of the Muslims.

The poets of the Shi'ites take this concept of the legitimacy of the Muslim leadership from several traditions of the Prophet on this subject. Among these Hadiths are those regarding a crucial event at Ghadir Khumm. Moreover, most of the people of Madinah selected 'Ali as caliph after the death of 'Uthman. From the legitimacy of the caliphate of 'Ali, his heirs also gained legitimacy.

The Imam 'Ali ruled in a just manner and divided the wealth among Muslims equally. He never distinguished one group from another; all free men received equal shares. For this reason the shi'ite poets described him as **imam huda** (a rightly-guided leader) to disinguish him from the Umayyad rulers.

Shi'ite poets used the term **wasi**, executor, to establish that the Imam Ali was the legal heir of the Prophet according to the Hadith of Ghadir and other related Hadiths. Therefore, the **wisayah**, testament, was the legitimate establishment of the succession to Muhammad's leadership. From this theory of legitimate succession the Umayyads were excluded. The Shi'ites considered them to be merely usurpers of authority which rightly belonged to the Hashimites.

Such sunni scholars as Ahmad ibn Hanbal, al-Haki, and al-Nasa'i recognized these Hadiths in their books. The Shi'ites used these sources to strengthen their theories concerning Ahl al-Bayt, and the shi'ite poets employed this evidence in their poems to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Hashimites.



Besides the tradition of the Prophet, there were many Qur'anic verses that supported the shi'ite theory, such as those cited above. Shi'ite poets enriched their poems with these verses, which demonstrated that 'Ali's obligation was from God and that all Muslims were to follow it. As al-Kumayt said: "**Haqquhu min Allah mafrud 'ala kull Muslim.**" (His right is an obligation from God upon all Muslims.)

The earth is seen as full of sin and oppression. Many people have seen their rights lost or abused. All therefore look forward to a man to save the people and lead them to a land in which there is security and justice for all. The Shi'ites look forward to that man, whom they call "al-Mahdi," to restore God's order of justice. The Shi'ites look to the future with hope and love.

Shi'ite poets picked up the idea of the Mahdi or messiah and composed their poems using this word in order to express their hopes and wishes concerning justice. They described the Mahdi as a man descended from the Prophet. His name, and his manner too, are the same as the Prophet's. This establishes the connection between him and the Prophet.

Because justice is a universal demand, shi'ite theologians identify it as a root of Islamic principles (**usul**). Therefore the Mahdi must have '**adalah**' (justice) in order to be a man who has committed no offense against any other person and who will bring justice to the earth.

The shi'ite poets expected the policy of the Mahdi to be even-handed and to satisfy the people, bringing prosperity to all. The Mahdi will turn drought-parched land into fertile fields and nurture the people. Before these things could occur, the poets expected the occultation of al-Mahdi, his disappearance for a long period of time, possibly as long as the age of Noah, which was approximatley one thousand years. The Shi'ites expect al-Mahdi to reestablish Islam and to bring salvation to the world, and that hope is reflected in their poetry.

## NOTES

- (1) Francesco Gabrieli, "Religious Poetry in Early Islam," in **Arabic Poetry: Theory and Development** ed.G. E. von Grunebaum (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrowitz, 1973).
- (2) John L. Esposito, **Islam: The Straight Path** (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 41.
- (3) Salma K. Jayyusi, "Umayyad Poetry," in **Arabic Poetry to the End of the Umayyad Period**, ed. A.F.L. Beeston, T.M. Johnstone, R.B. Serjeant and G.R. Smith, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 393-416.
- (4) Muhammad Khafaji, **Al-Hayah al-Adabiyah** (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qahirah), 10.
- (5) When al-Kumayt composed his poems, al-Hashimiyyat, 'Abdullah ibn Mu'awiyah ibn 'Abdallah ibn Ja'far collected some money for al-Kumayt, but al-Kumayt refused it saying: "I praised you, the Hashimites, for the sake of God." Then 'Abdallah asked "why don't you compose a poem that could cause **fitnah**, rebellion, and might cause things to change afterwards?" So al-Kumayt composed "Al-Mudhahhabah" in which he praised sons of Nizar, using chauvinism,

- and attacked the Yemeni tribes. For that reason some of the governor of Kufah's guards killed al-Kumayt. Al-Amini, al-Ghadir, 2:188.
- (6) Muhammad al-Kashif al-Kashif al-Ghita, **Asl al-Shi'ah** (Beirut: al-A'lam, 1982)
  - (7) Moojan Momen, An Introduction to Shi'i Islam (New York: Yale University Press, 1985), 147.
  - (8) Muhsin Al-Amin, A'tyan 1:107. **al-Shiah** ed. by Hasan al-Amin (Beirut: Darl-Ta'aruf, 1986) 1:107.
  - (9) Abdal-Husayn Al-Amini, **Al-Ghadir** Fourthed. Beirut: Daral-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1977. 67-112.
  - (10) Al-Amini, **Al-Ghadir**, 2:177. On this meaning of **gh-r-r** which I vocalize **ghurr** see Ibn Manzur, **Lisan al-'Arab** 10:43, s.v. **gh-r-r**. On **mayamin** see the same work, 13:457, s.v. **y-m-n**.
  - (11) Al-Amini, **Al-Ghadir**, 2: 177-9. Cf. Afandi's claim that Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah is unknown among shi'ite scholars, in **Riyad al-Ulama**, 4:59.
  - (12) Al-Amini, **Al-Ghadir**, 2:195. **Fasih wa-a'jami** doubtless means "Arab and non-Arab." Dawud Sallum who collected the poems of al-Kumayt claimed that these lines were attributed to the wrong poet, and therefore it was not genuine. Dawud Sallum, **Shi'r al-Kumayt ibn Zayd al-Asadi** (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Andalus, 1969), 3 (second part): 44.
  - (13) Muhammad Sayyid Kilani, **Athar al-Tashayyu' fi al-Adab al-'Arabi** Cairo: Jam'iyyat al-Nashr al-adabi, 1949 1-15.
  - (14) Al-Amini, **Al-Ghadir**, 2: 290-294.
  - (15) Al-Amini, **Al-Ghadir** vol.1-11.
  - (16) Salam K Jayyusi, "Umayyad Poetry" in **The Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period** Ed. F.L. Beeston, T.M. Johnstone, R.B. serjeant and G.R. Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 1983 393-416.
  - (17) "The most praiseworthy," i.e. ("Ahmad,"Muhammad the Prophet).
  - (18) **Diwan al-Sayyid al-Himyari** ed. by Shakir Heedi shikar Beirut: Maktabatal-Hayali, 1965 454.
  - (19) **Diwan al-Sayyid al-Himyari** 177.
  - (20) **Diwan al-Sayyid al-Himyari** 396-397.
  - (21) Ira M. Lapidus, **A History of Islamic Societies** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 117.
  - (22) Qur'an surah 5(al-Ma'idah): 55.
  - (23) Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, **Lubab al-Nuqul fi Asbab al-Nuzul** (Beirut: Dar Ihya'al-Ulum, 1978), 93. Cf. Ali ibn Ahmad al-Wahidi, **Asbab Nuzul al-Qur'an** ed. al-Sayyid Saqr (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, 1969), 192.
  - (24) Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri al-Jami' al-Sahih (Cairo: Wizarat al-Ma'arif, 1332 A.H.), 7: 122-123. Translation from E.W. Lane, **Arabic-English Lexicon**, s.v. **thaqal** 1:344.
  - (25) Ahmad Mahmud Subhi, **Nazariyat al-Imarah** (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1969), 209-257.
  - (26) Ibn al-Nadim, **Al-Fihrist** (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Tijariyah, n.d.), 263-264.
  - (27) **Diwan Abi al-Aswad**, Ed. Muhammad Hasan Al Yasin (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab, 1979), 119.
  - (28) Qusayy Shaykh Askar, **Al-Najashi** (Beirut: Mua'ssasat al-Balagh, 1988), 27.
  - (29) Hamidah, **Adab al-Shi'ah** 2nd ed., Cairo: Matba'at at Sa'adah, 1968 92-97.
  - (30) Ibn Shahr Ashub, **Manaqib Al Abi Talib** Qum, Iran: al-ilmiyah, 1956. 3: 46-49.
  - (31) Ibn Shahr Ashub, **Manaqib Al Abi Talib**, 3: 46-49. Cf. also Sulayman al-Qanduzi al-Hanafi, **Yanabi' al-Mawaddah** 1: 76-81. In these two books of tradition are many Hadiths from al-Tabari, Ibn Hanbal, and other canonical books.
  - (32) Ibn Ma'sum, **Al-Darajat al-Rafi'ah** Najaf, Iraq: al-Hajdariyah, 1962.
  - (33) Ibn Ma'sum, **Al-Darajat al-Rafi'ah** 189.
  - (34) Al-Kumayt, **Al-Hashimiyyat**, in **al-Rawdah al-Mukhtarah** (Beirut: Mu'assasat al- A'lami, 1972), 18.
  - (35) Francesco Gabrieli, "Religious Poetry in Early Islam," 8.
  - (36) Al-Isfahani, **Al-Aghani** Cairo: Dar al-Kutub, 1963; repr; Beirut: dar al-'Awdah, 1963. 16:328.
  - (37) Abd al-Hasib Taha, **Al-Kumayt ibn Zayd al-Asadi** (Damascus: Dar al-Wathbah, n.d). 17-18.
  - (38) **Diwan al-Sayyid**, 328.
  - (39) **Diwan al-Sayyid** 232.

- (40) **Diwan al-Sayyid** 297.
- (41) **Diwan al-Sayyid** 353.
- (42) Najm al-Din Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Askari, **al-Mahdi al-Maw'ud al-Muntazar** ('Inda 'Ulama Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Imamiyah) (Beirut: Dar al-Zahra, 1977), 1: 14-105. Also among 'ulama of the Ahl al-Sunnah are some who agree that al-Mahdi is a son of al-Hasan Dawud's Sunan, al-San'ani's **Kanz al-Ummal**, **al-Saw'iq al-Muhriqah** of Ibn Hajar, the **Muqaddimah** of Ibn Khaldun, **al-jam'**, **bayan al-Sihah al-Sittah** of al-Hamidi, **al-Futuhat al-Makkiyah** of Ibn 'Arabi, and others.
- (43) Abd al-Hasib Taha, **Adab al-Shi'ah** 97-106.
- (44) Abd al-Aziz Abd al-Hussein Sachedina, **Islamic Messianism** (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 5.
- (45) E. Levi-Provencal, "al-Mahdi," **The Encyclopaedia of Islam**, new ed., 2:1231.
- (46) Widad al-Qadi, **Al-Kaysaniyah fi al-Tarikh wa- al-Adab** (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqafah, 1974), 310.
- (47) **Diwan Kuthayyir** Ed. Ihsan Abbas, Beirut: Dar al-Thaqafah, 1971. 496.
- (48) **Diwan Kuthayyir** 521.
- (49) Ka'b ibn Mali' al-Himyari was a rabbi. He converted to Islam during Abu Bakr's reign. Then he went to Madinah during Umar's reign then to Syria where he died in A.H. 32/A.D. 652. Al-Zirkli, **Al-'Alam** 6:85.
- (50) **Diwan Kuthayyir** 232.
- (51) **Diwan al-Sayyid al-Himyari** 49.
- (52) **Diwan al-Sayyid al-Himyari** 117.
- (53) Abdallah Ni'mah, **Al-Adab fi Zill al-Tashayyu** (Kuwait: Dar al-Tawjih al-Islami, 1980), 181.
- (54) **Diwan al-Sayyid**, 69.
- (55) Muhammad al-Mahdi ibn al-Hasan al-Askari ibn 'Ali al-Hadi ibn Muhammad al-Jawad ibn 'Ali al-Rida ibn Musa al-Kazim ibn Ja'far al-Sadiq. Ja'far al-Askari, **al-Mahdi al-Maw'ud** 1: 275.
- (56) 'Abdallah Ni'mah **Al-Adab fi Zill al-Tashayyu** 183.
- (57) Al-Kumayt ibn Zayd, **Al-Hashimiyat** 80.
- (58) Al-Kumayt ibn Zayd, **Al-Hashimiyat** 80.

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